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ABSTRACT

The pamphlet contains general information and guidelines for parents of a preschool blind child. It is explained that a blind child needs what every child needs: love, good health, attention. Parents are urged to play with their blind child, give him opportunities to explore and grow, and to provide many and varied experiences for him. Although home life is considered preferential to residential care, nursery school enrollment is recommended. Additional child rearing suggestions are made concerning playmates, giving a blind child more time to learn, helping him to learn by doing, and the use of other senses. Parents are urged not to feel ashamed to seek help from parent groups or public or private agencies. (KW)

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the preschool child who is blind

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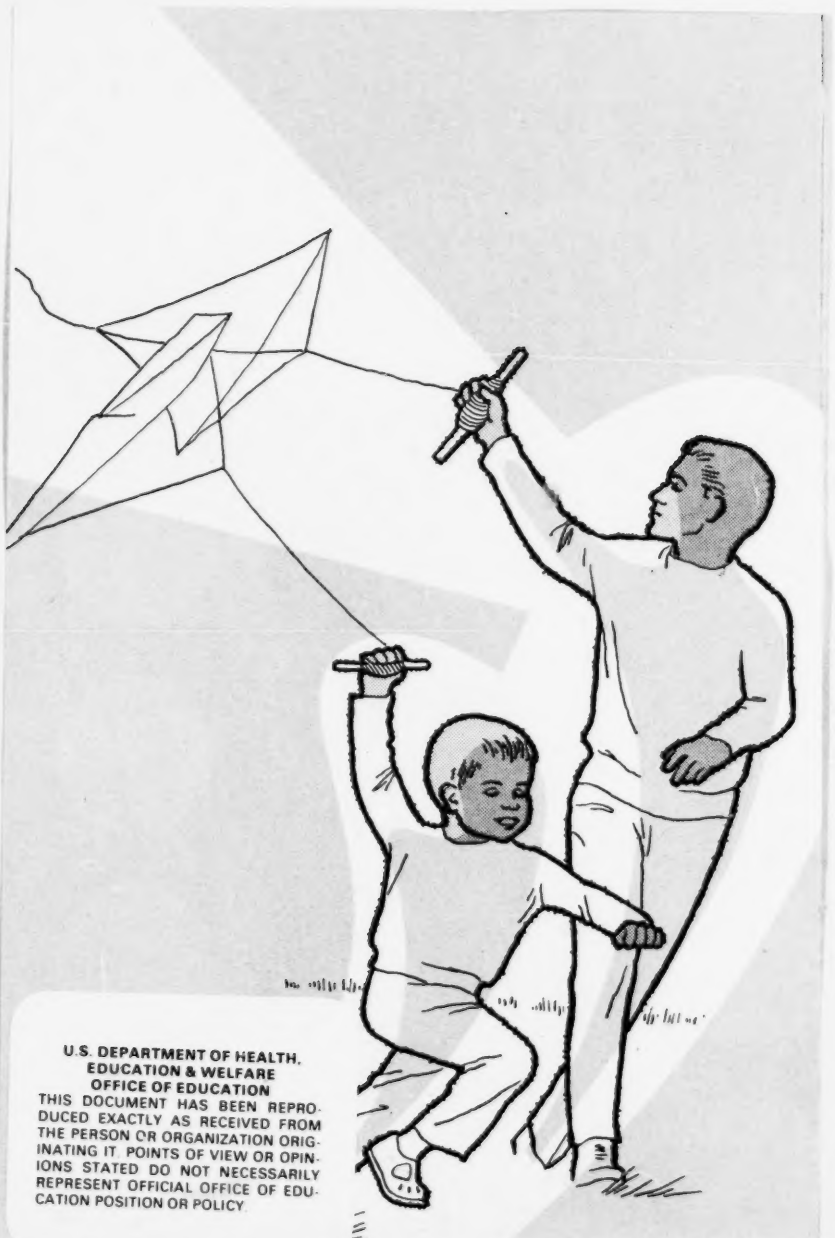

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PARENTS look forward eagerly to the birth of their baby. But when he is born blind, or becomes blind shortly after birth, they are shocked. Often they feel stunned by their grief.

The chances are they have never known a blind person. They may remember only those they have seen selling pencils on the street. They don't realize there are thousands of blind people who have responsible, well-paying, professional jobs, who perform skilled trades, who are business leaders.

They can't grasp the idea of not being able to see. They think that the child will feel about blindness the way they do.

The baby who is born blind doesn't know what seeing is. Nor does he know that he is deprived of anything, that he is missing anything. And he won't for a long time. He doesn't realize that others are

in any way different from him. So he is as content as any other baby.

By the time he realizes that he can't see, he can have grown into a happy person who is meeting life as well as any child. He can feel that he is loved and wanted and that he can make his own way.

It takes most parents a long time to get accustomed to the fact that their child can't see. And no wonder. All of their hopes and plans for the new baby seem to have fallen to pieces. They feel great aloneness and ask themselves: "Why did this happen to my child?" They are anxious about the baby's future happiness. They may even feel that it is their fault. They think they ought to be happy over a new baby. But they're not.

other parents can help

● It is perfectly natural and normal to have such feelings. They are not at all uncommon. Some parents are helped by talking with other parents of a blind child. Parents who already have lived through those unhappy first months and watched their child grow may be able to give hope to the new parents. They can tell the new parents that, as time goes by and as the baby begins to grow and develop, they will be proud of him and his accomplishments.

In their disappointment and distress, often it is hard for parents to realize their baby is first of all a child. One factor of his life is that he is blind. But there are many other factors. Blindness doesn't make him so different from a seeing child as one might think. He is far more like a seeing child than different from him. So the more the parents can learn about all children, the better they will be able to help him.

Like all parents, the mother and father of a blind baby want everything that happens to their child to build self-confidence and independence. They want him to eat, walk, dress, play with other children, go to school and enter into social life as all children do. In helping him to gain independence and self-confidence he needs your support.

he needs what all children need

There are certain things that every child needs. He needs to know that he is loved and wanted and is an important member of the family. He needs to be able to help himself and have others recognize that he can. He needs to know the happy feeling of getting something done well. He needs to grow continually in ability to direct his own play. Blind children need these things even more than other children.

And he needs good health. In addition to gen-

eral care by a physician, a blind child may need the care of an ophthalmologist (a doctor who specializes in conditions of the eye). From the ophthalmologist, parents can learn what their child's eye condition means.

Sometimes blind children and their parents need other professional help. If so, your physician or ophthalmologist may suggest that you seek help from another professional worker, such as a psychiatrist, a social worker, a public health nurse. Good mental and emotional health go hand in hand with good physical health in making a happy child.

For the first few months all that any baby needs is food, sleep, and fondling. Picking him up, holding him close, carrying him about with you gives a feeling of being loved and safe.

He is born with the urge to begin reaching out and moving about. But seeing nothing, he needs to be encouraged to reach and move through voices, other sounds, and a variety of things to handle. Thus his inborn curiosity can lead naturally to his growth and development.

As a start, he needs to be moved from place to place more than you would move a child who can see. And he likes to hear conversation between others and to have people talk to him. He can be propped up with pillows a little each day at about the same

time that any baby enjoys being propped up. If he knows that there is a string across his crib that toys are attached to, he will begin reaching and hitting at them.

Some parents are slow in playing with their blind baby. They don't joggle him on their knee or even pick him up. Babies enjoy such play and attention whether they can see or not. They may be little but they are not fragile and they enjoy a romp with their mother or father. Always let your baby know

that you are going to pick him up. He may be startled if suddenly he is lifted without warning.

help him get started

● Some parents keep their blind baby in his crib too long—weeks after he begins moving himself about, pulling himself up by the rail. They are afraid he might hurt himself when he begins to roam. Even when they place him on the floor he usually has no more space than a playpen. A playpen is fine but see to it that he doesn't stay there too long. Most blind babies can make good use of the outside of a playpen. They use it to walk around and pull up on. As soon as they can sit up alone, some like a stroller. As they grow and their feet begin to touch the floor, they can make little steps or push around in the stroller. Your baby may need encouragement to begin making little side trips—to feel the rug and the smooth floor, the stairs, the train of little wooden cars you will put there for him, the grass out of doors. Don't force him. One day he may not be interested in trying something, may even refuse to have anything to do with it. The next day or two he may want to try it. Accept his feeling in this regard.

A child who can see reaches out and goes to what he wants. A blind child doesn't reach out into the

unknown unless he has reason to. Until he becomes accustomed to his surroundings, he is limited in what he can explore and examine—two of the best ways by which babies add to their knowledge. A voice or some sound that interest him—like the tinkle of a bell—or offering him a toy that he is familiar with may be just the thing to get him going. A slight touch may cause him to reach out to you, then you can guide him along. If you are fortunate enough to have stairs he can climb on, encourage him to do so. If not, watch for other ways to give him the opportunity to climb—large blocks, a hassock, a small jungle gym.

mentally, they are like other children

● At first some blind children may be slower than sighted children in some things they do and learn. This slowness may worry parents. They may become fearful and wonder if their child's mind is affected. Slowness doesn't necessarily indicate a mental deficiency. Blind children are about like other children in mental ability. Some are average, a few below average, and a few higher than average—as are other children.

Not enough work has been done in making a

test that can be given to a blind child in order to learn whether he is normal mentally. But psychologists and others working in this field say there is a close tie-in between how high or low a blind child, who is otherwise normal, rates and how much security the child has and how much opportunity he has had to learn.

Parents can expect the blind child to do certain things as they naturally expect any other child to do them. They need not always "wait until he is older" for he is usually old enough right now and only needs the opportunity. If the blind child gets the same

chance as the sighted child, he will become a person, too, in his own right.

When parents find something is too hard for their child, they should not push him for success but give him encouragement, praise for his efforts, and try again another time.

If a child has any vision whatever—that is, if he can see at all, even to telling the difference between light and dark—encourage him to use it as fully as possible.

Some parents may worry if their child gets in the habit of rubbing and poking at his eyes, fluttering his hands before his eyes, holding his head down, or turning it from side to side. Children who see do this sometimes too, but they outgrow it sooner because there are so many things to do. The less fuss made about these mannerisms the better. If a blind child is interested in other things, he won't do them so much. In time he will outgrow them.

a blind child needs more time

● Though a child is blind, he is like any other child in most ways. Except for activities involving sight, there is little difference in the way you treat him and the way you would any other child in the family. It may take more imagination and patience

and it usually takes longer. But it is not a new way of teaching.

There's no magic formula—just as there is no magic formula for any other child. What helps one parent may or may not help another. Each child is an individual. His interests aren't the same as another's. His home situation differs from that of another child. No one way is "right" for every child.

Equally, there is no one and only way for every parent. Parents, too, are individuals. So there isn't any idea, or help, or bit of information that they have to stick to.

Helping any child to grow up is a hard job. At times it can be pretty rough and uncertain. When the child happens to be blind, it makes the job even harder for the mother and father.

he uses other senses

● The blind child depends on hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling for what he learns and does.

The child who can see uses his eyes, ears, and fingers working together. He hears his mother tell him what she is going to do and watches her drop a toy into a box. He sees how it is done as he hears how it is done and imitates.

For the blind child, ears and fingers must work

together. He must hear or feel what to do. Parents often have to help by building up his interest. That takes longer. And it takes a great deal more patience and ingenuity for the parent. Parents could save time and it would be much easier if they did everything for their blind child. But then he would never learn to do things, for we only learn by doing. He would always expect things to be done for him. Also, he

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wouldn't know how to do things for himself. He wouldn't like this either.

share his pleasures with him

● Give your child a chance to do a thing and time to do it in. Encourage him to try new things. When he learns something new, like pulling off his sock, or helping mother set the table, share his pleasure with him. That will make him want to keep on trying other things.

He can learn most things that a sighted child can. He can learn to do things safely that you at first thought were impossible for him, like running, climbing, roller skating, riding a tricycle. He will have many bumps, but he will learn to take them—if you don't make too much fuss over them. All babies take bumps. Some more than others. Some parents of a blind child think that every time their child falls down it is due only to his not being able to see. Most of the time it is just what takes place when any baby begins to get his balance, walk, and move about.

Try to give him many opportunities to do things for himself. Let him get first hand information by his own investigations. Give him something to occupy his mind and hands. Like all babies, he will like papers to crumple, and tear, a nest of hollow

blocks, pie pans, or a potato masher to bang with.

A child learns much from his toys and playthings. Today many of the toys on the market are made for that purpose: A small set of tools, dolls with clothes, tea sets, the little autos, buses, airplanes.

Frequently the sighted child understands a toy's use at once, having seen a bigger model used by grownups. The blind child may have heard the hammer or saw, ridden on a bus, heard an airplane, but has no true idea of what they are really like. As he handles a toy, explain it to him.

But don't be surprised if he gets more pleasure out of using a toy in a way other than that intended

by the salesman. Sighted children do this, too. Rather than rolling his auto back and forth, he may prefer to turn it over and spin its wheels. A child doesn't always follow store-bought directions.

As you feed and dress your child or give him something to play with, talk to him about it. For example, say something like this: "Now, we'll put on your coat. Hold out your arm." As you start to pick him up, prepare him by saying: "Up we go." In this way, he learns the meaning of words and connects them with what is being done. When you say, "Here's your toast," he will reach out for it. Use the words that seeing people use. "Here, Mary, look at this doll's pretty dress." "Tom, let's go out in the yard and see the flowers."

But when you say such things, let Mary "look" at the dress by feeling it. Let Tom "see" the flowers by smelling them. Our hands can tell us the difference between wool and satin. Our nose can tell us the difference between a rose and a carnation, just as surely as our eyes.

give him many experiences

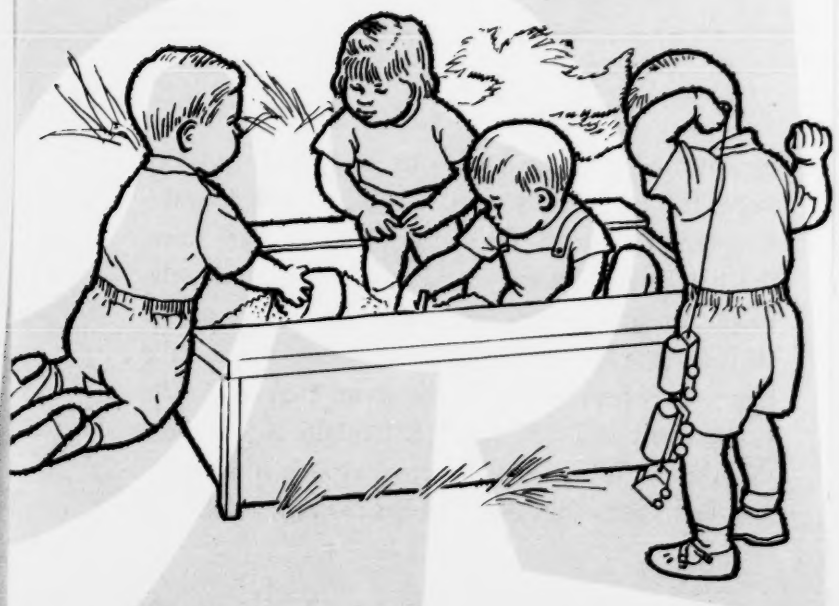
● Everything your child does, everywhere he goes, everything he handles and learns about—in other words, every experience—helps him in his gaining

of knowledge. Take him with you to the grocery store, the park, the woods, the brook, the zoo, the museum, the church, the concert, the hardware store, the neighbor's house, the library, a restaurant, the beach, a filling station, the place where daddy works. In fact, take him with you everywhere. Try to take him somewhere often. Walk more that you ride. Come home and talk about it. Explain as you show him things. When possible let him touch and handle and feel and manipulate. He has as much interest as

the next child. When his curiosity is encouraged, it will grow.

home life is best

● Home is the best place for most children. This is especially true if the child has a handicap—such as blindness. There are exceptions, but, as a rule, a child will find his greatest sense of security in his own home.



Some parents are torn between putting their preschool child in a residential nursery for the blind and keeping him at home. They feel that they may be depriving him of learning opportunities if they keep him in the family.

In general, what a child gets from family living can't be matched anywhere else. When he's not pitied or allowed to pity himself, when his mother and father take him and love him as he is and give him a chance to gain confidence in himself and what he can do, then he will learn to take his place in the world about him.

For a few blind children with particular problems—such as another handicap—temporary care away from home may be the best plan.

he can use a nursery school

● If at all possible, enroll your blind child in a nursery school. If the child is ready for it, he needs this experience even more than the sighted child. This is true because so many blind children haven't had all the opportunities they can make use of and need everything possible that will help in their total development.

In some places it is possible for the blind child to attend a nursery school along with sighted chil-

dren. If there is a nursery school in your town, talk with the teachers about this. You and they can decide when your child is ready for this experience.

find out about schools

● While your blind child is young, you may possibly have more time to find out what your community has to offer by the way of his formal education. Look for the best that's available for the sighted child. Don't be satisfied with anything less than that.

Planning and working with the school authorities are needed before your blind child is ready for formal education. Talk early with your local superintendent of schools. Write your State Department of Education. Find out what is available for your child or could be available when he reaches school age. These educators will understand your desire that your child's education will not be neglected in any way.

playmates are good for him

● You can't begin too early to have your blind child become friend and playmate of sighted children. Children learn a great deal from each other. Even at a very young age, children learn from their

playmates something of the way they are expected to act in the world. There is the give and take, there are the rules that must be followed, the playthings that must be shared. All this helps in their development.

Usually sighted children look upon blindness in a more healthy way than do many grown-ups. When your child's friends ask questions about his blindness, answer them frankly and simply. They are truly interested. But they are no more curious than they are in learning why some children have red hair or perhaps wear clothes different from theirs

At first it may be necessary to make an extra effort to get children together for play. But it is worth it when you see your child begin to meet real life situations as they are. If you can, put a sand-box, a single "jungle gym" to climb on, a swing and other types of simple play equipment in your yard. Keep modeling clay and finger paints on hand. Or a pipe to blow soap bubbles. Anything other parents may not want to be bothered with. Give a party for the mothers of some of the children he knows. Tell them to bring their children along. Any experience where he meets and gets to know and play with sighted children helps.

In families with other children, parents may tend to give privileges or do favors for their handicapped child. Let him do his share of the little tasks he is

able to do. Expect chores of him just as they are expected of his brothers and sisters. He wants to be treated like the other children. He doesn't want to be left out of anything.

The blind child is happiest when he contributes to the family and isn't always on the receiving end. When he and the family work together, his needed feeling of importance and usefulness grows.

Some people think pity helps a child. Yet nobody really wants to be pitied. We would rather stand firmly on our own two feet. We all admire and respect that in everybody. So if we are pitied, or fall into the habit of self-pity, we don't help ourselves.

world knows little of blindness

● Most of the unhappiness we blame on blindness isn't due to blindness itself. It's due to the way the family and the community and the world feel and act toward blindness.

Few parents are able to take it in their stride the first time a total stranger stops them and their child and expresses pity because their little boy or girl is blind. The stranger may even want to give money or candy to the child.

Inconsiderate and thoughtless words and acts of the sighted toward a blind person are due to ignor-

ance. The general public knows and understands little about blindness, and much of what it believes is untrue. As one mother put it: "It took me a long time to learn not to be irritated. But now I can honestly say to my boy: 'They don't mean any harm. It's just that they don't know.' "

get the help you need

● When you learn that your child is blind, begin at once to find out what help you can get to bring him up to be as much like other children as possible. Most States have some agency or group whose business it is to help parents of blind children. Check with your health department, board of education, or welfare department. They will be glad to give you information.

In some communities parents of blind children have formed clubs. The idea behind these clubs is not only to gain and share information but to get to know other parents of blind children. Parents say they not only get encouragement from these meetings, but often they are able to make and get suggestions that help other parents. Sometimes by working together, these parents have been able to interest their communities in providing more services for blind children. Sometimes these parents groups are spon-

sored by the health department or a hospital or a clinic or an ophthalmologist.

Sometimes a community has few or no services for the blind child. Parents have not been stopped by this lack. They have worked with others in securing needed services for children. They believe that any action directed toward helping *all* children will, in turn, be of help to their child.

The American Foundation for the Blind located at 15 West Sixteenth Street, New York, New York 10011, keeps a directory of all public and private agencies serving blind people in the United States and Canada. They can tell you what organizations are near you that work for blind persons. They also give information and advice on all matters concerning the blind.

The National Society for the Prevention of Blindness is located at 16 East Fortieth Street, New York, New York 10016. This Society works with agencies everywhere to plan programs for saving sight, improving and restoring sight, and for research in eye diseases that cause blindness.

and remember

● The first and last lesson for the parent of the blind child is:

Believe in him and have confidence that he can have a good life.

Give him love, affection, good health.

See to it that he is taught the skills and has the experiences that will develop his many abilities.

Don't be afraid or ashamed to seek help.

If you do this, he will be well on the road to independence and a life that is as interesting and happy and useful as that of any other person.

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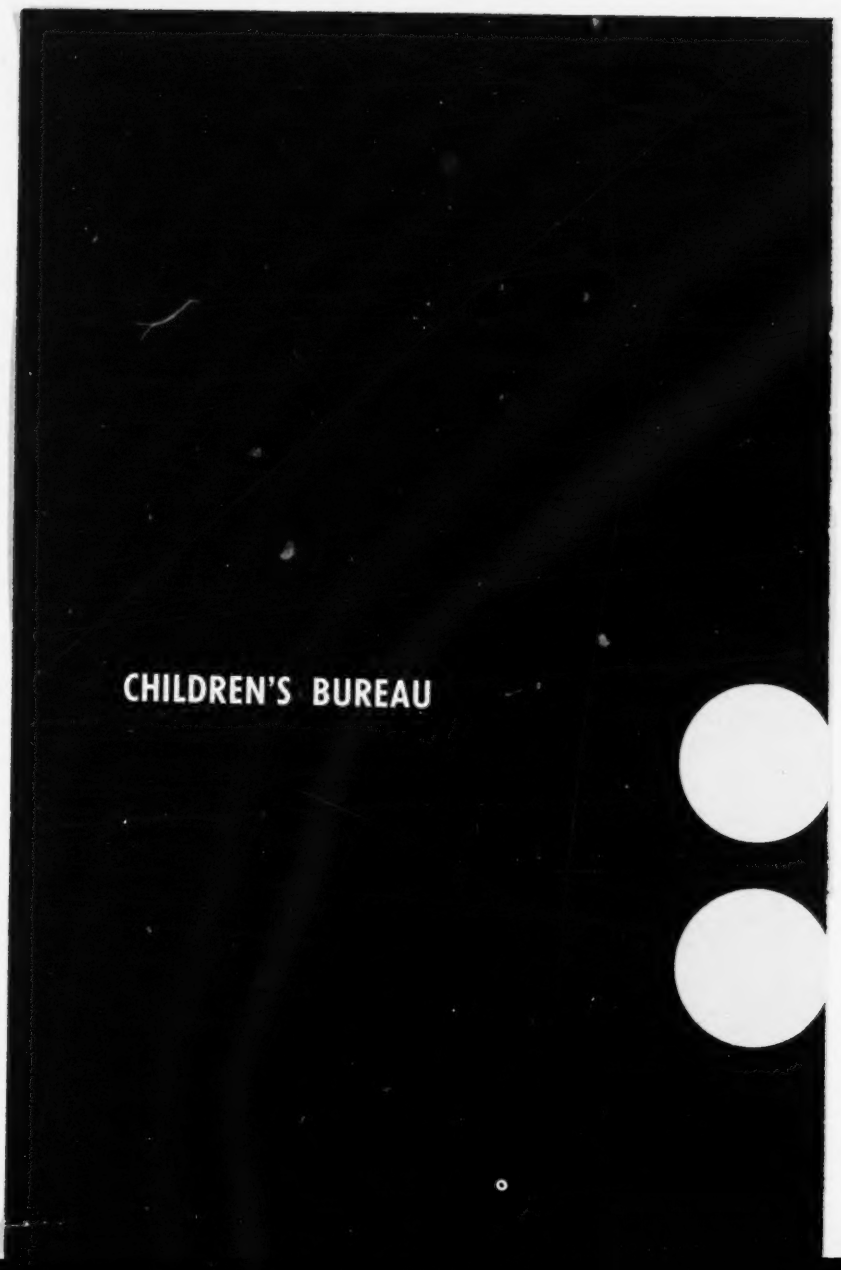
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